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ABSTRACT

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Research Report No. 60

PROBABILITIES ASSOCIATED WITH THE REFERRAL-TO-PLACEMENT PROCESS

Bob Algozzine, Sandra Christenson, and James Ysseldyke

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Bob Algozzine, Sandra Christenson, and James Ysseldyke
Institute for Research on Learning Disabilities
University of Minnesota

November, 1981

Abstract

A national survey of Directors of Special Education was conducted to ascertain (a) the number of students referred for psychoeducational evaluation, (b) the number of referred students evaluated, and (c) the number of evaluated students placed in special education programs. For each of the school years during 1977-80, the percentage of referred students who were evaluated was reported as 92% and the percentage of evaluated students who received special education was 73%. Although the probabilities associated with the evaluation of referred students and delivery of special education services to evaluated students were high, there was considerable variance; there were differences between rural, urban, and suburban communities, and between geographic regions of the U.S. Four explanations for the findings are discussed.

Probabilities Associated with the Referral-to-Placement Process

Between October 1976 and December 1980 the number of students served in special education increased by nearly 600,000 from 3,586,804 to 4,185,076[1]. This is nearly a 17% increase in the numbers of students served. Recently, educators have expressed concern about, and debated the reasons for, this significant increase. At least four kinds of arguments are heard.

The first argument is that Public Law 94-142 was intended to provide services for increased numbers of previously unserved students (Ballard & Zettel, 1977), and that under mandates for child find and delivery of services to individuals between 3 and 21 years of age, schools finally are beginning to serve all this nation's handicapped students.

A second explanation is an economic one. In Public Law 94-142 it was argued that:

> Developments in the training of teachers and in diagnostic and instructional procedures and methods have advanced to the point that, given appropriate funding, state and local education agencies can and will provide effective special education and related services to meet the needs of handicapped students. (U.S. Senate, p. 776)

Proponents of this explanation argue that an increase in the numbers of students served is a logical consequence of increased funding.

A third explanation is one stressing that increasing numbers of students are experiencing home and family problems as well as within-student deficits, dysfunctions, and disabilities, and are in need of special education services. In 1979 the National Education Association asked a national sample of regular classroom teachers to identify the causes of students' academic and social problems (Teacher Opinion Poll,

1979). Of those teachers responding, 81% said student difficulties were caused by home and family problems, 14% said they were caused by within-student deficits, 4% attributed problems to the ways in which schools are organized, while 1% said problems were due to inadequate instruction.

The fourth explanation is that we have developed a "massive system of identification" (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1982) designed to accommodate an increasing lack of tolerance by teachers for "difference." It is argued that an increase in the lack of tolerance on the part of teachers, along with an increase in the availability of services, has fostered a "shuffling of the decks," an increased movement of students from regular to special education services. Glass (1981) noted that mental retardation, speech impairment, learning disability, and emotional disturbance are such non-specific conditions that they can be believed to exist in 4.7% of the population in one U.S. State (Delaware) and 0.1% in an adjacent area (Washington, D.C.). He observed that current diagnostic practices are arbitrary. Scriven (1981) refers to a current "diagnostic scandal." Sarason and Doris (1979) state that the diagnostic process is characterized by a search for pathology and an effort to figure out what is wrong with an individual. They emphasize that persons other than the referred individual (e.g., teachers or parents) initiate the referral-to-placement process; the characteristics of the individual do not, in isolation, lead directly to referral for diagnostic study, but the interaction between those characteristics and the characteristics of the initiator do.

The accuracy of decision makers in the referral to placement process has been addressed. Algozzine and Ysseldyke (1981) reported that 51%

of placement team decision makers declared normal students eligible for special education services. Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, and Graden (1981) reported essentially no relationship between the decisions reached by placement teams and the extent to which the assessment data presented at team meetings supported those decisions. Shepard and Smith (1981) reported that 49% of the students placed in PCD (perceptual and communication disorders) classes in Colorado were misplaced.

The purpose of this investigation was not to test the validity of the competing explanations for the large increase in numbers of students served by special education. Rather, the purpose was to provide data that would help support or negate the competing explanations. To date, there have been no data on the probability that referral for psychoeducational evaluation will result in placement in special education services. We investigated specifically the numbers of referred students who were evaluated, and the number of evaluated students who received special education services during 1977-78, 1978-79, and 1979-80 school years.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 94 Special Education Directors from 37 states who responded with complete information for a given school year. No data were received from Arkansas, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Utah. The range of Special Education Directors responding from any one state was one to five.

The respondents were distributed fairly evenly across the four

Bureau of Census Classification regions: Northeast - 22%, North central - 29%, South - 27%, West - 22%. Over half of the sample designated their community as rural (55%), while 19% and 26% described their community as urban and suburban, respectively.

Materials

A brief postcard survey (see Appendix A) was developed to obtain information from Directors of Special Education. For each of three academic years (1977-78, 1978-79, 1979-80), three questions were asked: (1) how many students were referred for psychoeducational evaluation, (2) how many referred students were evaluated, and (3) how many evaluated students received special education services? In addition, directors were asked to provide demographic information on their districts.

Procedure

A letter explaining the purpose of the study and a postcard were mailed in January 1981 to Special Education directors randomly selected from a state-provided lists of directors. The number of directors in each state who were sent questionnaires corresponded to the number of representatives in the U.S. Congress, resulting in an initial mailing of 435 postcards. For each letter returned due to an incorrect address, another was mailed to another director randomly selected from that state. After six weeks, the return rate was only 12% (51 postcards). Since it appeared that it would not be possible to obtain the information using the original criteria, a decision was made to secure data from at least two directors per state. The second mailing of 315 letters and postcards was based on the need to fulfill this requirement, with directors again being randomly selected from the remaining names on the original lists.

Specific criteria were followed for determining the number mailed per state. If no postcards had been returned from a state, six were sent in the second mailing; if one postcard had been returned, four were sent in the follow-up; and if a state had returned two postcards, two were sent. In addition, due to the low return rate on the original mailing, a statement requesting return of the postcard if the data were unavailable was stapled to each of the 315 postcards in the second mailing.

Data Analysis

Only those postcards for which information was complete for a school year (e.g., numbers referred, evaluated, and eligible) were included in the data analysis. The numbers provided by directors for each academic year were averaged and then converted to percentages to reflect (a) referred students who were evaluated, and (b) evaluated students who were declared eligible for Special Education services. The percentages were analyzed for the total national sample, for the four geographic regions (i.e., northeast, north central, south, and west), and for the three types of community (e.g., urban, suburban, rural).

Results

The return rate of the postcards was 22%. Of the 164 returned postcards, 35 (4.6% for 750; 11% for 315) were returned blank, 12 (1.6%) provided partial information (e.g., only placement data), 23 (3%) completed the postcard inaccurately, and 94 (12.5%) provided requested information accurately. Two factors influenced the return rate. Many directors reported that they do not have access to these data; others completed the postcards

inaccurately by giving data on the total number of students enrolled in special education (e.g., 415 referred, 400 evaluated, 3219 served). Only the 94 accurate sets of data were analyzed.

Total Sample

Table 1 presents the percentages of referred students evaluated and evaluated students served for each of the school years during 1977-80. The percentage of referred students who were evaluated was consistently about 92% each year and the percentage of evaluated students who received special education was consistently about 78%. Thus, if a student is referred for psychoeducational evaluation, it appears the probability is about .92 that the student will be tested. If a student is tested, the probability is about .78 that the student will be declared eligible for and receive special education services. Considerable variance in probabilities was observed, as indicated by the ranges reported in parentheses in Table 1. In some districts, as few as 39% of referred students were evaluated; in others all referred students were evaluated. In some districts as few as 10% of evaluated students were placed, in others, 100% of evaluated students were placed.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Type of Community

Also included in Table 1 are percentages broken down by type of community (rural, urban, suburban). While probabilities across the three school years were consistent within each type of community, differences were observed between rural, urban, and suburban districts. Fewer referred students were evaluated in urban districts. Similarly,

fewer evaluated students received special education services in urban (about 62%) than in rural (about 73%) or suburban (about 73%) districts.

Geographic Region

Data also were analyzed separately by region; these data are summarized in Table 2. Percentages within each of the four regions were stable across the three school years. Yet, there were differences between regions. More evaluated students were declared eligible in the South (about 80%) and West (about 77%) than in the Northeast (about 67%) and North central (about 65%) regions.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

The return rate for this survey of 715 Directors of Special Education was low, suggesting that many school districts do not have data on the questions asked. This is troublesome. Districts should be gathering data on the cost-effectiveness of the referral-to-placement process.

Overall, the probabilities associated with the evaluation of referred students and the delivery of special education services to evaluated students were high. At the same time, there were differences among districts in different geographic regions of the U.S., and among urban, rural, and suburban districts. There are at least several alternative explanations for the observed differences.

It could be argued that there really are differences in the prevalence, and thus, incidence, of handicapping conditions in different localities. It could be, for example, that there really are more mentally

retarded, learning disabled, and emotionally disturbed students in the south and west than in other regions of the country. It could be that there are more handicapped students living in rural and suburban districts than in urban settings.

A second explanation for the observed findings is an ecological one. It could be argued that the different values, expectations, and social contexts of different regions and communities directly influence standards for deciding that specific kinds of behaviors are deviant. If this is true, we would expect to find the kinds of variance we found.

A third explanation relates to differences in the ways in which the referral-to-placement process is organized in different regions and school districts. Observed differences in probabilities might be accounted for by differences in the use of consultation, building-level teams, etc.

A fourth competing explanation is that differences in probabilities are a direct function of differences in the criteria used to declare a student eligible for special education services. We know, for example, that different states, and districts within states, use different criteria for declaring students eligible for LD services (Mercer, Forgnone, & Wolking, 1976).

The most logical explanation for our findings is a political one. Overall, the probabilities associated with the referral-to-placement process are high. We do not believe that teachers are so good at spotting handicapped students that they are accurate roughly 75% of the time. Rather, we question the purpose being served by assessment in school settings where an average of 78% of assessed students are declared eligible for service, and especially in the many settings where 100% of

evaluated students are declared eligible for special education service.

Ysseldyke and Algozzine (1982) describe current assessment practices as teacher-driven and as operating on the assumption that the purpose of assessment is to find out what is wrong with students identified by teachers as having something wrong with them. They provide data suggesting that placement team meetings are capitulation conferences. We concur with the statement that "special education diagnosis is a duke's mixture of politics, science fiction, medicine, social work, administrative convenience, and what not" (Glass, 1981, p. 2). These data, along with the findings that 49% of PCD students in Colorado are misplaced (Shepard & Smith, 1981), that 51% of decision makers declare normal students eligible for special education services (Algozzine & Ysseldyke 1981), and that there is no relationship between decisions made by placement teams and the extent to which data collected support those decisions (Ysseldyke et al., 1981), raise critical, indeed embarrassing, questions about the referral-to-placement process. We believe it is time to recognize the social-political context within which the referral-to-placement process operates, and to work rapidly to develop a defensible system for making service delivery and resource allocation decisions.

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Footnote

Bob Algozzine is also Associate Professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Florida, Gainesville.

[1]There are no reliable national statistics on the numbers of students served prior to October, 1976 (Danielson, U. S. Office of Special Education, personal communication, 1981).

Table 1

Percentages of Referred Students Evaluated and Percentages of Evaluated Students Served for the Total Sample and for Each Type of Community[a]

	1977-78	1978-79	1979-80
Total Sample[b]			
Referred Students Evaluated	91.9 (39-100)	92.4 (43-100)	92.1 (46-100)
Evaluated Students Served	73.7 (10-100)	73.1 (17-100)	72.2 (18-100)
Rural Districts			
Referred Students Evaluated	92.7 (68-100)	92.1 (43-100)	92.8 (48-100)
Evaluated Students Served	73.4 (10-100)	74.1 (28-100)	72.9 (27-100)
Urban Districts			
Referred Students Evaluated	84.9 (39-100)	89.3 (46-100)	86.2 (46-100)
Evaluated Students Served	63.0 (16-97)	61.4 (17-97)	61.7 (18-98)
Suburban Districts			
Referred Students Evaluated	92.6 (59-100)	93.4 (68-100)	93.7 (70-100)
Evaluated Students Served	73.5 (25-100)	73.5 (27-100)	72.9 (25-100)

[a] Numbers in parentheses are the ranges of percentages.

[b] Data for the total are not an average of data for rural, urban, and suburban districts because some Directors did not report community characteristics.

Table 2

Percentages of Referred Students Evaluated and Percentages of Evaluated Students Served by Geographic Region[a]

Region	1977-78	1978-79	1979-80
Northeast			
Referred Students Evaluated	91.0 (39-100)	91.7 (46-100)	92.7 (46-100)
Evaluated Students Served	67.5 (10-100)	66.3 (17-100)	68.5 (18-100)
North central			
Referred Students Evaluated	92.3 (60-100)	92.5 (43-100)	90.8 (48-100)
Evaluated Students Served	65.1 (25-100)	65.6 (28-96)	65.6 (22-97)
South			
Referred Students Evaluated	93.1 (68-100)	91.6 (49-100)	93.0 (64-100)
Evaluated Students Served	80.9 (35-100)	81.8 (42-100)	79.0 (45-100)
West			
Referred Students Evaluated	90.9 (59-100)	93.8 (75-100)	92.0 (68-100)
Evaluated Students Served	81.2 (25-100)	78.8 (27-100)	74.6 (25-100)

[a]Numbers in parentheses are the ranges of percentages.

Appendix A

I. Demographic Information

State in which located _____

# of students (K-12) in entire school district_____

Circle one: rural urban suburban

II. Referral/Placement Information (Elementary only)

# of students who were referred in

1977_____

1978_____

1979_____

# of referred students who were evaluated in

1977_____

1978_____

1979_____

# of referred students who received Special Education services in 1977_____

1978_____

1979_____

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